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On organisational change and organisational unchangeability

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Dear Diary – Lessons From Victims Of Change - On Organisational Change And Organisational Unchangeability

Stream 4: Theatrics of Capitalism

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1. Introduction

Michael was not at all pleased with his job situation. The everyday life in the SoftWare Company had gone from worse to intolerable. During the last year Michael and his fellow software developers had been the victims of endless restructuring initiatives, development programmes and change and improvement schemes. They were fed up. The team were almost unable to develop the kind of software it was expected to develop in the first place. And because of the programmes, the schemes and the initiatives there was not much hope that the situation would improve much.

Elef was not happy either. He lived in a society where change was hailed as the most important principle. This principle of constant change concerned everything. That is, every day Elef was offered a new job, a new residence and – that was his problem – a new partner.

The situations of Michael and Elef are very similar: they are both the victims of endless changes – changes that effect the quality of their everyday life to an extent where they both felt they had to take action. They both did something actively in order to escape the menace of change.

While Michael is working as a project manager in the SoftWare Company, Elef is the main character of the dystopian novel by the Danish author Svend Aage Madsen¹ (Madsen 1980). So, while Michael's story is real, Elef's story is fiction. Even if there is this – very important – difference between the two there are some very striking similarities which will be the subject of the following investigation.

In this article I will be concerned with some aspects of organisational change. By comparing the experiences of both Elef and Michael I will point to some interesting features of organisational change. Especially the ability to facilitate the understanding of change processes in social settings through the use of a diary. While narratives and narratology seem to have found its place in organisation studies, diaries seem to be a fairly under-researched area. Diaries could play a role in organisational change – why and how is shown below.

2. The situation – point of departure

Elef lives in a future society where all evil has been abandoned - a society where everything is taken care of for the individual and where most of the menaces of life in the modern age have been eliminated. Everyday people in this future utopia (dystopia it turns out to be – more later) are given a new job, new accommodation and a new partner and family. By means of “the change system” (“Udskiftningssamfundet”, literally translated into “the replacement society”) this future society is able to prevent boredom and fatigue. Every morning everybody wake up in a new bed with a new partner, assigned to a new job. All this is calculated and organised by a central computer called Madam Datam. Every day she (oh, yes - it is a she) will, on the basis of each individual's own wishes, calculate which partner, job and home each individual is going to have the next day. This is a happy society indeed. Fear, aggression, jealousy, conflict are all forbidden and non-existing and all the changes conducted by Madam Datam make sure that everybody is satisfied every day.

Madsen's book was published in 1980 and one of the ideas of the book – the replacement society – could be seen as a polemic against the then current debate about the status of the core family in particular and the relations between the sexes in general. Many Danish authors, mainly female, questioned the reasons for the bourgeois marriage and the idea (ideal) of lifelong partnership (Gemsøe 1997). Madsen's novel is a classical science fiction novel written in the tradition of Orwell (1949) and Huxley (1970). The main theme is - like in Huxley's and Orwell's works - the individual against the totalitarian system. And even if Madsen's replacement society is a happy one, we learn that Elef finds life intolerable, he wants more than just a succession of happy days. He wants meaning, coherence and a life long relationship with the woman he loves.

To compare the dystopian novel of Madsen to a present day situation of organising software development might seem far-fetched. Nevertheless, I will argue that the replacement society in

Madsen's novel has striking similarities to what has become known as modern management, which could be seen as a real life replacement system.

Michael is a software engineer working as a project manager in a software developing company. The company used to be a medium sized software company, developing software solutions to the electronics industry. Used to, because a lot of experienced software engineers left the place due to dissatisfaction with the state of affairs. The present situation was characterised by abundant changes that made the engineers confused and dissatisfied. Even if the changes were meant to make things easier, just like the replacement society, it seemed not to work as intended. The SoftWare Company was originally a true entrepreneur set up. But through the years the entrepreneurial spirit had gradually disappeared as the new owners introduced new management techniques. In the beginning this was really not a problem. The management techniques were more or less ignored, and the engineers followed their normal procedures. And the management at the time left them alone as long as they produced the software they were expected to. But the latest resell of the company changed all that. The new owners wanted to integrate the SoftWare Company into a structure of similar companies in the owner's home country. This meant that, in the name of division of work and efficiency, the engineers had to perform only parts of a project and do this in an internal competition with people in their sister departments. In order to co-ordinate these activities the new management introduced several measures, most of them described in three letter abbreviations. When these measures did not work as intended they were not revised, but just replaced by new ones. This was the situation.

3. ... then one day ...

We need a plot (Czarniawska 1999 pp. 63-95), and in Elef's case it is a classical love story that leads to dramatic events for the characters involved, just as it is in the novels of Orwell and Huxley. One day Elef finds out that he has fallen in love with one of his one-day wives, Maya. A thing not allowed in the institutionalised promiscuity of the replacement society. So like in Orwell's novel Elef has to rebel against the system that forbids him seeing Maya.

Again, it might be stretching things far when comparing the plot of Elef's story to Michaels. In Michael's case it was definitely not a love story (or maybe it was – think of Aramis (Latour, 1993)), it was a new project, the MA74 Project. It is doubtful if this can be compared to a forbidden love, but anyway. Michael wanted to do the MA74 project in a way, which he knew from experience would guarantee success, and he did not want new management tools to interfere with what he saw as unnecessary bureaucratisation of work modes. So, this also led to a kind of rebellion against forces that prevented him from doing what he felt was right. So in that sense, two similar stories.

In Elef's ever changing society the aim was to live one day at a time without being disturbed or upset in any way. Indeed a life in peace. It was expected that if people could live one day at a time, and each day was a tranquil one, then life in general would be happy. This perspective has the consequence that the past does not exist. In this society without a past it is impossible to even think of a future. This is really no problem because Madam Datam will take care of that. But when Elef falls in love he suddenly wants to think of a future with Maya, and then he realises that he needs a past. Therefore he begins writing a diary.

Michael also wrote a diary. He was also part of an ever-changing system. Or so it seems. The SoftWare Company had seen numerous changes and with the last take-over, the speed by which new organisation changes were announced had increased. Michael may have written his diary with the same intentions as Elef. He wanted to create a future for the MA74 project and he wanted to get hold of his past and present. He wanted to get an overview of all the obstacles that prevented him from succeeding with the MA74 project.

In both cases the diary was a tool for creating order in the seemingly chaos imposed on them.

This was the situation for Elef and Michael. Elef had fallen in love – which was forbidden in the replacement society. Michael wanted to pursue his professional ambitions through the MA74 project, but the constant changes in the SoftWare Company made it very difficult for him to get started at all. The project kept stalling; it got nowhere.

Elef took action, when he broke into the house where Madam Datam was placed and changed some of the punched cards so Maya would be his wife the next day. (One of the ironies of Madsen's novel is the low-tech status of Madam Datam. She uses punched cards and valves, just to emphasise that in this society technological development is non-existing). He is successful in his attempt and the next day he actually wakes up next to Maya. They decide to leave the replacement society. This is difficult for them, as the system is all encompassing; there is no life outside the system.

Michael did not have to break in anywhere to be assigned to the MA74 project. There is no hint in the diary about how he was assigned to the project, but in mid January Michael and all his colleagues in the R&D department were called to a meeting. Everybody was there and they were presented a kind of videoconference showing the intentions of the new management. The presentation was a very colourful one. The slides were filled with pictures of racing cars, happy cheering people, handshakes and first and foremost boxes with arrows between them. The message was partly a kind of we-are-one-family pep talk and partly a presentation of a new organisation chart. In this also a new work mode emphasising a modularised development procedure. This was all to start at the beginning of February. The basic idea about modularization was to use and reuse the same type of soft ware in all development teams, no matter in which development facility they were placed.

The first project to follow this new organisation chart and the new development procedure was the MA74.

4. Ready to go ...

On Tuesday March 20 the entire development staff management team met to discuss the strategy for the coming visit to the head quarter. The manager of the development department presented two project proposals for the MA74. The first proposal was the one that was proposed by the head quarter. This was regarded a very un-realistic proposal. The second one was a much more realistic proposal made by the head of the MA74 project. The second proposal was made in a way that everybody believed would secure the success of the project; the first was made in a way that would secure support from the head quarter. Consequently the first one was chosen. Or as Michael describes it:

“I know that if this is what the head quarter wants and if some high rank manager in the head quarter has already committed himself to this proposal, then this is a project that – even if it is a mission impossible – will not be closed down as long as we can produce any progress. And we need a project that can help us integrate in the new organisation.”

Michael also sees this as a possible way of getting rid of what he calls politicians and thereby he can be part of a project where software engineers can get the time and space they want in order to work the way they want. The reason was:

“The MA74 is already behind schedule, this is evident to everybody and I am sure that all the politicians will leave the project soon, they do not want to be part of a delayed project. We, then, are left alone to do the work we like.”

Michael expressed his point of view directly at the meeting and all other software engineers agreed with him.

In an e-mail the same day the manager of R&D announces the launch of the MA74 project and he also informs that there will be some changes in the management team.

Michael attends a workshop at the head quarter on March 21. The workshop introduces the new software platform and it was quite successful from Michael's point of view. There were no obligations to his team, as the engineers knew nothing about this platform - it was all new to them. Therefore they could ask silly questions without any considerations.

The second day of the workshop was also fine. Spirits were high, and Michael and his colleagues returned with a brand new project, which Michael describes as a technical challenge. But there were some second thoughts as well. Because the project was not only a technical challenge which was interesting. There were also the challenges of organising the project. This worried Michael quite a lot. At the workshop there were no problems. The project was divided into several subprojects that were to be taken care of by development groups from the different development facilities. But internally in Michael's team there were things to consider. First they had to learn the new organisation principles that were part of the new work mode. Previously each project had a project management team, which everybody working on the project referred to. The new principles introduced another layer of management between the project management team and the software engineers. The idea was to establish a kind of seller-buyer relationship between the project management team and each group of engineers. Each of these groups should deliver so-called technology packages ordered by the project management team. Michael did not like the idea.

“I never understood how such an organisation could work. The principle behind this is that everything could be negotiated between the project management team and the group-manager (that is the manager of the development groups). ... All our experience tells us that developing software is a long period of uncertainty where new ideas constantly pop up. Something which it is impossible to negotiate in advance - especially concerning deadlines and milestones.”

The second concern was the project management team itself. The project manager was in place and so was Michael as responsible for software development. They still had to find two more managers; one responsible for the contact to hardware and end users and one vice-manager to assist Michael. They tried to involve their network in the organisation and several people were contacted. During three weeks in March and April Michael dedicated a lot of time to the task of finding the persons for the jobs.

In mid April they were ready to take off. They had a project management team for the MA74 project, they had a new software platform, which was to be implemented, and so were the new organisation principles.

The first task was to produce a so-called master plan for the project. This plan was to outline the division of work between departments and workgroups. This was all settled and on Friday 4 April when the master plan was presented at a joint meeting with all parties involved.

5. Getting started – ... again, again ...

With the master plan the MA74 was ready to go. On Monday the 9 April there was a management meeting. “We discussed how to get the project started ... again, again ... “. They found out that it might be difficult as everybody – even in the project management team – were engaged in unfinished projects. Next day Michael met with his colleague co-responsible for the software development. They foresaw that the software part of the project would be the most difficult part. Partly because it was difficult to find experienced engineers – a lot of the experienced software engineers had left the company, partly because software development was by far the largest part of the project. They decided

to call a meeting where everybody who was to be part of the project was invited: The project management team and managers from all development groups. The purpose was to discuss the internal division of work between the groups and some technical details too. It was also the intention to discuss the co-operation with the foreign development groups. But first and foremost it was an attempt to get the software part started. Most of the software engineers had been working on the delayed Old Project and moral was very low. A lot of experienced engineers had left and the rest was exhausted after loads of overtime and weekend work. In order to make them interested in the MA74 project they had to be challenged with a technically interesting project. They also had to learn about the new software platform, which they were expected to be reluctant to work on. Another reason was that the management team wanted to have a first mover advantage in the coming struggle about the project. They were afraid that some of the managers of the development groups would make deals behind the backs of the MA74 management team. In order to prevent this an e-mail was sent to everybody. The e-mail described the present status of the project and called the meeting on the 18 April. The reason for this timing was that a lot of the group managers were on vacation after the hard work on the Old Project, and the meeting would not give them time to make more appointments behind the backs of the management team. In the e-mail it was hinted that the meeting was important to those who wanted to have a say in the project e.g. allocation of resources, project design etc.

On April 17 – the day before the meeting with the group managers – there was a meeting in the project management team. They discussed how to get things going. They decided to have a meeting with some people from strategy, to hear their opinion about the project. How it would fit into the overall strategy of the SoftWare company. At the meeting they were also informed by the project manager that there would be some changes in the division of work between the groups, especially between the Danish and the foreign groups.

At the meeting on the 18 April some of the most important group managers did not show up. This was a major blow as it mainly was the software people that did not attend. This once again delayed things, but an agreement concerning division of work was officially presented. It was also revealed that some of the group managers had made some appointments already in early April, and these agreements were not announced to the MA74 management team until this day. Information like this flows in the following days. That is information about the “Product concept” document, about the foreign groups, but information also flows from the MA74 management group. This information was about the overall design of the software, about the ways in which the groups were organised, but it seems that even the management team had severe difficulties finding out how these groups were organised. They had been the victims of constant organisation changes, the last one in January, and at the moment - end of April - no one knew who was doing what, or who was organised in which group.

On April 20 Michael tries to sum up the situation in his diary. “Next week we expect to get the project started”. In order to get started Michael produced an activity list. This list included ideas on how to adjust the wishful thinking of the “Product concept” document to the realities of the technology groups - how to secure the groups the new technologies to fulfil the requirements of the software development. “This might be the greatest showstopper” as Michael puts it.

They needed to consider the problem of modularity. This has become a major political concern as it is going to decide the future division of work between the groups. Next Thursday (26 April) there was a meeting in one of the foreign development groups and modularization was raised as a major question. Everybody was expecting a brawl. This had already caused some problems internally in the Danish development team.

One of the group managers has demanded to be present at every meeting where his people were attending. Michael took on this challenge and invited the guy to every meeting, bombarded him with e-mails, reports and memos that he wanted this fellow to consider. After a while he was brought to silence, and they heard no more of him.

Other problems were to be considered. One was documentation. Each month the management team would have to document the progress of the project. This had to be done in a careful way, as nobody in the project wants the overall management to interfere with the project. This would probably happen and would only produce more problems for everybody. The old system of process documentation, the system from the previous owner, was manageable according to Michael. This meant that it was no more complicated than it did not interfere with the work of the software engineers. The fear was that the new system would be so comprehensive and so complicated that it would do harm to the software work. But some initiatives were taken. The manager of the MA74 project managed to get into a workgroup that were to discuss the problem.

At a meeting on 23 April the project management team discussed these issues. But they were also informed about changes – once again – in the division of work between the development groups. Some projects had been postponed in order to make room for the MA74 project and this project had been given a higher priority concerning software. “This is going to be fun,” Michael writes in his diary. “A new project on a new software platform with a new documentation and procedure system in a multi site development organisation with a matrix type of structure”. At the same meeting a hire-freeze was announced. “This is good” Michael writes “then we will not have all the newcomers thrown into the project when it really gets busy”.

The next day a new meeting. This time they discuss how to handle meetings in the project. Already at this point a lot of time had been used, wasted, on umpteen meetings and everybody could foresee that this would worsen in the time to come. A workable agreement was made, but Michael was not pleased: “No wonder I never saw a project manager in my previous projects – and what about the ad-hoc meetings?”

The same day the group managers, who did not show up at the previous meeting, were called for a new meeting. Again they did not show up. Much to Michael’s disappointment, because there were still lots of stuff to discuss before the work on the software part could start. They needed to discuss which quality inspection system to use, hardware, servers, new software platform, training. “If this is not settled soon we will not be ready to launch the software part before July”, Michael writes in his diary.

6. The turning point

Elf and Maya fled the replacement system, and they found themselves in deep trouble. They had nothing to eat, nowhere to go and they hit rock bottom when they made a suicide attempt. After this unsuccessful event they started to create a life outside the system. Other outsiders helped them: People who did not fit into the system, but posed no threat to the system either – and therefore were left alone. Through these outsiders they got in contact with Varinka. Varinka was an old hag living in a small cottage in the countryside, outside the system. Through her they learned about the past. About the wars, the crises and the great depression. The great depression was a global suicide epidemic where people killed themselves in order to escape the meaninglessness of modern society. Through Varinka they learned about this and they decided to continue Varinka’s work on writing the history of the past.

Michael knew no Varinka, but he had his books on organising software projects (e.g. Borum 1987). Here he learned – or rather they confirmed him in his own ideas - about organising software development. He learned that software cannot be developed in a rational process copying the methods of modern management. He was sure that other means of management were necessary.

After all the meetings at the end of April not much progress had been made in the MA74 project. There was a management team, the project had been announced to the rest of the organisation and some appointments had been made, but the software part – Michael’s labour of love – had at this point not moved an inch. Something needed to be done in order to produce some progress.

From the diary it seems that Michael chose a completely new strategy, possibly inspired by the books. Instead of relying on the grand meetings, which people generally ignored, and the formal procedures,

he starts individual talks with the actors involved. This was mainly done through the work on the Old Project. The Old Project was still taking a considerable amount of Michael's time – it had to be finished before the MA74 could get started. Michael did not mind though, it gave him an excellent chance to talk to people he wanted to have in the MA74 project. "I got a chance to see them work under pressure," he writes.

From 27 April onwards most of Michael's time was dedicated to the Old Project, but he was still very much concerned with the MA74 project. So instead of the grand meetings he worked behind the scenes, talking with the people he wanted to involve in the MA74 project. Through these meetings starting at the beginning of May and three weeks onwards Michael succeeds in getting hold on several things concerning the project.

Michael and his colleagues wanted a technical specification put into the "Product concept" document, in order to safeguard their future work on the project. Before the "Product concept" document was finished the responsibilities were placed at marketing, but after "Product concept" the responsibility is placed at the MA74 management team. They therefore want to make sure that the technology was not changed against their wishes. Marketing was not pleased. They wanted as broad a description as possible; the MA74 management team wanted as narrow a description as possible. Michael and his colleagues in the management team had very strong cards on their hands: They refused to sign the "Product concept" document if there was no technical specification. "Marketing is really a pain in the ..." Michael writes in the diary. The first "Product concept" document did not impress Michael and his colleagues. They called the proposals from marketing "without any technical insight" and therefore just a kind of wishful thinking. Therefore the "Product concept" document it is not going to make it on time – possibly one month's delay.

Michael also finds the time to make sure that a new project management tool is not implemented. The software engineers do not want such a thing. They felt that it was a bureaucratic obstacle that prevented them from doing their job. Michael is citing a software management book he has read: "Such tools do more harm than good, they give you the illusion of truth when all you have is estimates. They give an illusion of control when all you have is data. They focus your attention on your computer screen instead of on your people". Michael had told the overall management that if they wanted things like that they could implement it themselves. He knew that this was never going to happen and considered this a major victory.

Finally Michael succeeds in head-hunting the new member of the team. Michael wanted the new member of the team to co-ordinate the relations to all external partners. This is a job almost without any technical content. The job was entirely organisational. This was very much in conjunction with Michael's own ideas for the project. He gradually realised that the organisational part was the essence of the project; especially what he called informal organisation or network. Michael was eager to make this right, therefore he wanted all the contact persons in the development groups to attend joint training courses in project management. This was an idea not that well received in the management team, but Michael wanted to maintain this idea.

There were also some grand meetings in this period. With very short notice – in early May – there was a meeting where all group managers showed up. The reason for their attendance was partly because the overall R&D manager told them to, partly because their investment budgets were cut by more than half. "If they want investments they need to be in a project like MA74".

From May 22 - 25 the negotiations with the development groups continued. Two members of the management team visited the foreign development teams and internally they discussed intensively the status of the relations to the development teams. It was foreseen that problems was very likely to occur as some of the development teams were to develop new technologies and some would have to work on known technology. This would mean that those working on new technologies would be very easily motivated and those working on old technologies would be very hard to motivate. This division of

work between those working on old and new technologies had also resulted in a lot of rivalry between the development groups. No one wanted to be left solely with old technology – “They are genuine development engineers” Michael writes in his diary.

The rest of May was dedicated to work on the Old Project. But again the idea of a modularised software development procedure haunted Michael. Some of the development group managers fancy this idea.

“... they have a very theoretical attitude towards software development. They dream of modules, but have no experience with development of software. They think they can specify software in advance and let somebody else integrate the software in the final product. Developing software after certain specifications is like walking on water. It works best if it is frozen. It is first when the software is integrated into a product, that we know how to make it. We change so much in the soft ware along the way”.

In early June another change in the organisation of the development groups was announced. This was done by e-mail, without much explanation of why this change was necessary. The change had some implications for the MA74 project. The Danish development groups were going to have one overall manager, referring to the overall R&D manager. This was a new layer of management and Michael foresaw that this new manager was going to interfere a lot with the work of the MA74 management team. But there were benefits as well. Now there was one person to turn to and in the job description of this new manager it was specified that he was responsible for the integration of the new software platform. “I am sure we will stop the talk about modules – we practitioners are sick and tired of that word.”

In early June Michael was also hosting a meeting with all the people involved in software development of the MA74 project. Michael was quite satisfied with the result of this meeting and with himself as well. At the meeting only technical details are discussed: “We need to play this in an offensive way, so we can draw the project away from politics”. Michael was worried that the constant changes in organisation structure would increase chances of changing the project into a death march, a project with a very high risk of failure.

The MA74 project manager was not attending the meeting with the software people. He attended another meeting at the headquarter. Here he informed the R&D management of the risks of the MA74 project. Such as technical problems, due to the modularization project, organisational problems due to new and old technology, too many and contradictory features in the final product (stemming from the “Product concept” document produced by marketing), and several other minor problems. In order to minimise these risks he was told to ignore the modularization part and develop the software in the way the project team wanted to. “Hmmm ... it seems we are back to square one. Platforms and modularity is replaced by synergy.” At the meeting it was decided that Michael should create a proposal for a software solution which was to be approved at the next development meeting in the head quarter.

Early June - hard ware problems. It had not been decided yet which microprocessor to use in the project. Michael thought that this was all settled, as it normally would be, but this had been reopened for negotiations. This caused unrest in the entire development organisation. Some of the groups were very aggressive.

Michael wanted to arrange a workshop concerning software. He wanted to invite all Danish participants in the software development. He was informed that some of the contact persons from some of the groups were not allowed to participate. The development group managers would not have it. Michael invited them any way.

The same day as the invitation to the workshop was sent out new changes in the organisations was announced. This time it was an outsourcing package that was introduced. Parts of administration and some after sales service had to go. Simultaneously the Old Project starts haunting again.

The workshop was scheduled to take place on Wednesday 13 June. One of the development groups had produced a kind of contract, stating what each participant should contribute to the project. "This is worrying – it is the first time ever anybody had asked for a written agreement". Michael foresees problems between some of the development groups.

7. Finally ...

Finally – Thursday June 12 – the MA74 project team could get started. They used all day planning the project. There were still problems with the software part. Therefore Michael introduces a kind of analysis of interests. This ends in a discussion on how to handle the development groups; should they be treated as internal partners or should they be treated as external partners. In the first case the project would "rent" the engineers from the development groups, in the second case there would be a written contract and the development groups would be treated as sub-suppliers. Any solution would have its cost and benefits. Second it was discussed how the project group should measure progress. A lot of the problems in the Old Project were that it was measured and quality checked according to each individual software module. This caused all the problems because even if the modules were all right no one knew if the integration of the modules in the final product would work. In the Old Project they did not. Therefore it was decided to use functions in the final product as goals for the software development. At this meeting Michael again introduces the idea of focusing on the organisation part of the project. As he states in the diary:

"An R&D organisation is a social system; many people have to work together in order to achieve the goals. Even in the quietest and most peaceful organisation thing will not turn out the way they were planned, because so many people have to work together. One little mistake from one single person can make things go wrong and the organisation will not reach its goals as planned. It was not possible to follow the plan – we had to improvise".

The workshop was fine; a very technical discussion of the project, but underneath was concerns about the development groups and their internal relations ever present. A lot of rumours were exchanged.

Thursday June 14 another organisational change from headquarters. Apparently this will never end. "We are sick and tired of this, every time a structural change is presented as the cure for all our illnesses, this is a big mistake. It is not working now, why should another change work then".

A round of job cuts followed this and an increased job freeze; among the people laid off were four software engineers. This was lowering moral even more among those still left in the development groups. Later same week this was expected to hit the foreign groups as well. It was expected that the willingness to co-operate would be harmed by that.

In the rest of June and the first part of July Michael and his colleagues are working on the MA74 project. Things were still very difficult. Names of departments and groups have changed again. Michael has finally succeeded in persuading his colleagues in the group management team to focus hard on the social side of the project.

"We, in the management team, often feel that we are buffers between the internal fights between the development groups. Therefore we have begun to focus on the motives of the different actors, why they behave the way they do, in the different situation they are placed in. We want as many as possible to feel they are part of the project. It is much

easier if we got 50 software engineers as part of the project and not just us in the management group”.

Michael expected – if he was successful – to be able to foresee the actions of the parties involved. Therefore he produced a profile of each partner. The profile described the political interests of each group, and he was also trying to describe the possible actions on the basis of this. This was discussed with the other members of the group.

At the end of July Michael finally feels that it is possible to launch the project. It would not be finished as a fixed plan, because the management group had decided that as much of the project as possible should be floating, but now at least it was manageable.

8. Organisational change – Lessons from the diary

The story of Elef and Maya ends in a sort of happy way. After Varinka’s death they keep on the work she had begun; writhing about the past. Before she died Varinka told them about the reasons for establishing the change system. She told them that at the end of the great depression expert commissions discussed what to do, and it was decided that it was time to create the perfect society. The experts asked people what they wanted and on the basis of this, they created a sanctuary where people could be safe from the great depression. Varinka was offered a place in the sanctuary, but she refused with the reason: “I would rather struggle with life and be unhappy than have happiness for nothing. They accepted and I stayed outside”. The system was a huge success and was copied everywhere. This was the start of the replacement society. Then she tells them:

“I was angry when you came to me, as you are a symptom of the system we have created – it is not perfect. And I was saddened, because I know how difficult it is to change the solution we have made. It is almost unshakeable. Unbelievable stable, unchangeable, unchangeable ...”

Michael’s story – even if it has no ending in the same way as Madsen’s novel – also ends in a sort of happy way. He manages to set up the MA74 development team in the way he wanted to, but it took him almost six months. He got rid of the most annoying management tools. The matrix structure, where the management team should buy technology packages from the development groups, was never implemented and the old type of hiring people from the development groups was continued. The project planning schemes were not implemented, so Michael could focus on people instead of data and computer screens. The idea of modularization was abandoned at least for the MA74 project. In all Michael and the MA74 management team created a situation where they could manage the project in a way they felt was right and in a way that made it possible to achieve the goals they had set. So, in this respect it was a successful outcome. But there is a certain irony to all this, because this was all achieved through a very frustrating process in which Michael was constantly complaining that he was getting nowhere. In the diary he is describing the situation as stalemate, dead march etc. But as I have hopefully been able to show, Michael was very able to get the project going despite all the obstacles.

Maybe Michael’s frustrations stem from his expectations. Maybe he expected too much. Maybe he thought that at least some of the management tools would help him, and he got disappointed when this was not the case. When he finally realised this, when he started to focus on people, as he calls it, some of the frustrations disappeared and he ended being quite satisfied with his achievements. His respect for head quarter type of management and control systems had disappeared completely and his concern for everyday type of management (leadership?) proved much more fruitful.

Madsen’s novel about Elef and Maya is a classical dystopian tale of the individual seeking happiness fighting an inhumane system. Using this perspective on Michael’s story we could say that the modern

management exercises (the modularization, structural changes, the project management systems etc.) are exercises made solely in the systems world. They do not do much good to people in their life world. This is not to say that the announced changes do not interfere with the everyday lives of the people involved. They definitely do. But certainly not in the way they were intended. They created no change. Instead they created the inability to change, where they intended to create change. The large number of announced changes created a kind of fatigue that made changes impossible, at least through large-scale announcements. This is evident in Michael's diary. In the first part of his diary the announced changes are called changes in organisation structure, just as they are called in the announcements. Later, after the dissatisfying meetings in April, he simply calls them work group renaming, emphasising that these changes will just give new names to existing work groups. Work modes, procedures and division of work have not been changed at all. The changes are superficial – they are without content, but certainly not without impact. They create un-changeability.

When Michael realised this, he changed strategy. He started to work behind the scenes. With the distinction between life world and system in mind we could say that he gives up the system and concentrates on the life world. At first sight this seems strange as Michael again and again is emphasising the difference between politicians and technicians. This is strange as Michael himself is playing a political game. But if we again use the distinction between the system and the life world we might see something in this. In Michael's perspective politicians are people without any technical insight, working on the conditions of the system – they are also the bad guys in Michael's story. The good guys are the technicians. They do interfere with system politics but are mainly concerned with their trade, the development of software. And they want to create the space for themselves where they can do this. They see the politicians as the people that are preventing them from doing this. Technicians are concerned with technology and they talk about the development of technology (in this case the development of software) in much the same way as craftsmen or artists talk about their trade. This could look much like a classical conflict between artists, researchers or craftsmen and a bureaucratisation of work modes. The artist wants values; the politician (bureaucrat) wants efficiency.

“ - There were sorrows and worries then, yes, but there were also values which we are not to let go. You got to revitalise them and break down the artificialness.” Varinka tells Elef and Maya just before she dies.

In Michael's case the politicians want – according to Michael – systems that are able to document efficiency. And also according to Michael, they are more concerned with the systems than the technology these systems should document. The modularization project is an excellent example of this. Modularization freezes the development situation, counter to what was expected. The basic idea about modularization was to use and reuse the same type of software in all development teams, no matter in which development facility they were placed. In this sense the modularised development programme is a rationalisation exercise. Maybe Madam Datam was the result of a modularised development process. There are three main lessons to be learned from Michael's story. First that the management initiatives that ought to create change, created stalemate instead - un-changeability, inability to act, together with a lot of frustration, dissatisfaction and unrest. In Madsen's novel the constant changes of the replacement society created un-changeability. Without a past it is impossible to think of a future and therefore it is also impossible to change things. So the outcome is in both Michael's and Elef's case is the same: the constant changes created un-changeability. But maybe the circumstances creating the stalemate are not the same. In Elef's case it was the missing past, the historylessness. In Michael's case it may be the ability to remember that made the members of the organisation unable to act. They had seen so many changes and were confused. They had seen so many new organisation charts introduced

with such a speed, that one chart had not been implemented before the next one arrived. This made them ignore the changes.

Second the power struggles between politicians (representing the system) and technicians (the good guys in Michael's story) is almost built into the organisation and is very hard to handle, if the goal was to produce results – in this case software solutions. The solution to both conflicts was for Michael to negotiate with the individual actors that he wanted to be part of his project. This could be similar to the solution Elef and Maya chose.

The third lesson concerns the use of the diary itself in the change process. In the last section I will take a closer look at the role of writing a diary in an organisational change process.

9. Diary and change – time and narrative

At first sight the diary could be seen as a kind of x-ray image of a change process - at least a change process seen from one single person's point of view. Therefore we could see the relation between a change process and a diary as the diary's ability to facilitate our understanding of the change process and even facilitate the change process itself. Because, as we shall see, the diary can be seen as a tool for helping the actors through the change process.

According to Porter Abbott (1984) there are three different functions of a diary strategy when used in a fictional novel. That is a mimetic, a thematic and a temporal function. In the following I will let these functions guide an analysis of Michael's use of the diary, when trying to manage his actions and thoughts about his project.

In a literary context, like Madsen's novel, diaries are used to create an illusion of the real. This illusion Porter Abbott (1984) calls mimetic functions. The diary creates this illusion in two ways. First because of the "artless spontaneity" of the diary, that is the diary was not intended as literature in the first place but had other purposes. Second, the diary is a document in itself. With all the connotations of authenticity this will bring. So, the diary form is often used in literature to bring the reader an illusion of an account of real events. In Madsen's novel this is also the case, even if he undermines this illusion by letting his tale develop in such a bizarre universe.

In Michael's diary this mimetic function is evident, as he is trying to create an account of a series of events. And the events are real. The mimetic function became very important to Michael, because it came to function as a kind of extended memory. In this respect the diary came to be very helpful in the time of the project. With this extended memory it was possible for Michael to recall previous events, and use this to create the project. He was able to present facts at meetings, which everybody else seemed to have forgotten. He could recall previous agreements somebody else would have liked to see disappear. In this respect the diary was and is an illusion of the real, but certainly with a lot of importance and with a lot of impact. The diary – even if the mimetic function is just an illusion – certainly has its history of effect (Gadamer 1960).

Thematic functions are described as the diary's ability to portray the inner world of a person and this person's thoughts in isolation and self reflection.

“One of the great expressive advantages of the diary lies in its confinement of the reader to the internal world of a single ego” (Porter Abbott 1984).

The diarist is basically writing to himself, there is not necessarily any other reader than himself. In doing this he is creating a kind of timeless refuge where he can think, reflect and discuss with himself. This is evident in both Michael's and Elef's diary. They both used the diary to get outside the system, consider the conditions of the system and then return with a new world view better suited for the changes they would like to see realised. Outside the system it was possible to create a language that was able to facilitate the changes they wanted. Outside the system it was possible to

think of a future and it was possible to act accordingly. This worked for Elef and partly for Michael, but would this work in other change projects as well. That is, could this be a general lesson on organisational change that one has to seek refuge in a cottage in the woods, in order to create the language necessary for the changes? Maybe it is. The system itself may not be able to create such language and therefore this position outside is necessary. Maybe not, the cottage in the woods – even if it has been the preferred place for many² (Heidegger 1991) – could be seen as a romantic solution to the problem. Romanticism is very seldom a sustainable solution to problems. The system did interfere with Michael's project. The system cannot be ignored in the cottage. Both Michael and Elef would at some stage be forced to interact with the system in order to change the system. It is doubtful if Michael in all future would be able to ignore the change-schemes presented to him by the headquarter.

The third function, the temporal function, is perhaps the most important for the study of organisational changes and the use of the diary, as there is an intimate relation between change and temporality – obviously.

“If the past, and commonly the recent past, is a vital factor in the special effects of the diary strategy so is the role of the future”. (Porter Abbott, 1984 p. 30)

But first before I consider the relation between temporality, diary and change, I will take a closer look at the relation between time and narrative. The diary is a special type of narrative. If this narrative is able to help us understand and even facilitate change processes, we need to know how narrative are dealing with time and change in order to see why this type of narrative is relevant to our study of changing organisations.

Time and narrative

There is no scientific theory of organisational change. Even if several studies of organisational change have tried to outline such theory. A Newtonian theory of organisational change would be subject to a serious paradox. It would have to be a timeless, epistemic, theory explaining time. Therefore I would argue with Gadamer (1992) when he states that changes can only be communicated as a narrative, while math can only communicate what is stable. Nørreklit (1984) has very convincingly argued that social science theories resting upon systems models cannot help us understand change. Stage models would only provide us with “sequences of timelessness” (Nørreklit, 1986) and by its un-dialectical nature such theories of organisational change would consequently miss the point, which is to explain and understand change. If so, then we would have to turn to a theory based on narrative, looking for time and change and how they are explained through narrative.

Narrative in organisation studies is nothing new – right from the start organisation sociology was based on narrative. The scientification is a more recent phenomenon, but narratology as the theoretical basis for studies of organisational change came after the scientific theories. Especially Czarniawska (1997 and 1999) has used literary theory to show the workings of organisations.

Concerning the problem time and narrative the writings of Ricoeur (1984 - 1988) is where this relation is analysed most extensively. Following Ricoeur (1987a) the conventional, scientist interpretations of time describes time as a “linear succession of moments” (similar to Nørreklit's “sequences of timelessness”) where time is confused with the measurement of time. Time is thereby reduced to an object of measurement and this reduction is the basis of the concept of time used in scientific models of organisational change, consequently providing them with their un-ability to explain change.

Instead Ricoeur analyses time through Heidegger's existential analysis of time and compares this analysis to the temporal structure of narrative.

"What is happening happens within time". Ricoeur starts off his analysis with this seemingly simple statement. To be in time is something completely different than measuring time. There is a large difference between our everyday counting on time and the counting of moments.

To illustrate this difference we could use the concepts of ready-to-hand and present-at-hand (Ricoeur 1987a, Heidegger 1995 (1927) pp. 69-70). In our life we are, according to Heidegger, thrown into the world. We are concerned with the things that surround us and we care for the world we live in. In this sense the things are ready-to-hand for us. We could also make the things objects for a conscious investigation and they would be present-at-hand for us. This difference could we make count for time as well. Some times we take time for granted, and sometimes we make time an object for measurement. We are within time, not measuring it. In this case a scientific model of change would not be able to analyse the time, cause it would only treat time as a succession of moments, not being able to describe the being-within-time-ness. This is where the narrative comes in, because, according to Ricoeur, there is a mutual relationship between narrative and time.

"Temporality is an existential structure reaching into the narrative language and narrativity is a language structure that has temporality as its ultimate reference" (Ricoeur 1987a).

Temporality in narrative is not just structured around a succession of moments. If so, all stories would be quite boring (and then, and then, and then ..). Instead narratives are able to handle much more complex temporal structures.

Comparing narrative to the existential analysis of time shows us that to tell a story is to place narrative in time. To tell a story is not first and foremost to be concerned with time, but to take time for granted, without making time the subject of an analysis. A story told is already spread in time and the adverbs, such as then, since, now and so forth, helps us do that. So, in the grammar of the language there is all the tools needed for placing the narrative in time, and to analyse time in a very subtle and dialectical way.

"The organising theme that identifies the significance and role of the individual events is normally called the "plot" of the narrative". (Polkinhorne, 1988.)

The actors of the story are within-time-ness – they do not have to count time. This brings us the third temporal mode, the plot. The plot is what guides the events in the story. According to Ricoeur, the plot is just where narrative and time meets each other. The plot is ordering the events in time and makes it possible to follow the succession of the story.

"Plot, in this context, means the structure based on causality rather than sequentiality, on transformation rather than succession" (Czarniawska, 1998)

By telling a story it is possible to follow a series of events and – this is the important part – to follow the people involved and getting to know these people. A good story will make it possible for us, through a fusion of horizons, to understand the worldviews of the people that are actors in the story. This is much more than just a succession of events. We get to know how and why the actors make their interventions into the world, as we get to know of their actions and their considerations about these actions. The actors in a narrative would always be in a changing situation. If they were

not it would be absurd, like in a play by Becket – the unchanging situation is itself made into the plot of the story. Even if a lot of organisation narrative looks very much like *Waiting for Godot*. To sum up. Narrative is more than just a series of events in time. It is also a way of getting to understand motives, world views and logics of the actors involved. It is also a way (perhaps the only way) of understanding time. Not only as a succession of moments, but also as a way of disclosing the experience of being in time that the sequential concept of time missed. If the story about Michael, or any other story for that matter, was told solely as a succession of events (moments), we can almost eventually hear the listener/reader cry out asking “why”. Why did this happen? The plot will help structure the story so it becomes clear why things turned out the way they did. Plot is about causality and transformation. And this was exactly what we needed for understanding organisational change. A very common plot is one of stability - change – new stability (Home-journey-home again, but changed). This type of structure of stories also guided us through the story about Michael and Elef. First we presented the situation, then came the plot – “... then one day this happened and everything started to go wrong (or change)..., but finally ...

Diary and change

Michael’s diary was able to show how he was thinking about the project. It was possible to learn about a software engineer trying to create a new challenging project. It was also possible to see some of the very complicated and subtle processes that lead to the establishment of the MA74 project. So in this sense the narrative method seemed to work. But there are other things about the method to consider. Madsen’s novel was composed as a diary, and so was Michael’s ... diary ... obviously. This could result in a type of narrative that was based on a succession of moments. If Elef’s life in the replacement society were to be described in this way, we would have to settle with a narrative that was solely based on a succession of moments. There would not be much to tell that could be of interest to us. This was the intention of the replacement society. No one should get a chance to be upset, to be jealous or to feel anything at all. The tranquil life was the main purpose of the replacement society. Without the plot, the love story, nothing would have happened, and the novel would have been quite boring.

“Elef and Maya had come to an end. They have not ended the project Varinka gave them; others can continue their work. They are satisfied. “We have had a life, instead of a long row of days, says Maya thoughtfully. – And that is good. Just like a solid novel is better than a pile of incoherent aphorisms”.

Now, with the plot, it is in fact an interesting, even thought provoking story. Michael’s diary is also very interesting, well written with wit and also very thought provoking, as I hopefully have been able to show. A diary could be difficult to read because it may be organised as a succession of moments. This is not the case for Michael’s diary, because Michael created causality with his diary. He was part of an organisation that seemed to be a mess. As a project manager he found it very difficult to create order in the chaos he was confronted with. Through the diary he was able to create an overview of his situation. He was able to create an understanding of what was going on and he was able to suggest actions and interventions that would help him create the MA74 project. He was able to create the transformation that the management tools were unable to facilitate. This gives the status of the plot a whole new meaning. A plot was described as something that creates transition and causality – without plot there would be no coherence, just successions of moments.

Borum (1995) argues that there are several ways to tell a story about organisational change. Multiple case stories, confessional tales, impressionist tales, and the like. He also argues that the plot is not just there – the author creates the causality, the teller of the tale makes the plot.

“The well-ordered appearance of the case stories is a narrative construction. Narratives are normally ordered as a sequential account of a series of actions. Generally there is postulated a plot and causality. The events of the story are expected to be coherent, and the chronology is the basis of the causality: previous events are affecting later events.” (Borum 1995, p. 119)

This might be the case in many instances. Above I have argued that the plot in Michael’s diary was the establishment of the MA74 project. But who chose this plot? Maybe I did. This plot was not the only one in the diary. Other plots might be possible (Technology, the Old Project etc.), but I chose this one. This shows that in order to use a narrative method one has to be open about how the story is told. I had to tell it and in doing this I used Madsen’s novel. This also shows that in a narrative method the author/researcher has a role to play. But what Borum misses is the role the plot – the causality and transition – played for Michael. Michael used the narrative method through his diary, and this helped create order in the seemingly chaos he was placed in. Thereby narrative, plot and causality becomes more than just a method used by organisational researchers. It can be used as an active tool for organisational practitioners.

Michael’s diary shows again and again that there are things to consider concerning organisational changes.

We could, from a narrative analysis point of view, say that Michael was struggling with the logic of the management systems. These systems and the belonging tales and stories of the head quarter postulated a type of causality that the actors did not recognise or understand at all. This management logic did not fit into their everyday life. Michael realised this and started to tell an alternative story with a different logic, with different types of causality. This is a difficult task as we can see in the diary. It is a journey into the unknown, because Michael and his colleagues was not only fighting the very misleading causalities of the management systems, they also had to invent new types of causality as they were trying to establish the MA74 project. They were creating a language they felt belonged to them and were much better suited for the project, as they knew from experience that their own language would be much better suited for the establishment process, than a language (and world views) imposed upon them from head quarters. Therefore the narrative analysis did not only show us the world views of the actors, but also their struggle to create order in a seemingly chaotic world. This process of creating order could be seen as the essential process of organisational change and the narrative method could be seen as the method that discloses this process. And the cottage in the woods and the diary are perhaps very necessary tools in this process of creating alternative logics and world views – in creating a future.

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Notes

¹ Svend Åge Madsen. Many facettted, fantastic, timeless - all of these are adjectives which in one way or another can be applied to the work of Svend Åge Madsen, one of the most prolific, original and widely-read of contemporary Danish novelists. Confusing, chaotic are also adjectives that might be chosen, though with the reservation that there is definitely order in the apparent chaos, and if the reader is confused, then perhaps he should look again. For Svend Åge Madsen has a mathematical mind - indeed, he is a trained mathematician - and his work is based not only on a remarkably fecund imagination, but also on a highly logical working out of the plots of even his most fantastic novels. That not everyone is confused by them is betokened by the great popularity the author enjoys - particularly among readers who are young either in years or in mind.

Excerpt from the web-page about Danish authors, By Glyn Jones, 1999.

<http://www.litteraturnet.dk/danvalg/frameit3.asp?dest=http://www.litteraturnet.dk/danvalg/sog.asp!fid=46>

² A local newspaper reports that Madsen writes his books in a cottage in his back garden.